The Many Benefits of Growing Crab Apples

14 November 2013, written by Benedict Vanheems

The September arrival of our beautiful baby daughter prompted my wife and I to plant a tree to commemorate her entry into the world. Of course, such an auspicious occasion has demanded a particularly special tree; one that looks good year-round, attracts wildlife into the neighborhood and is able to offer some fruits that can be put to use in the kitchen. The decision was immediate – it had to be a crab apple.

Crab apples are essentially the same as apples except that they bear smaller, tarter fruits. The trees themselves have a relaxed, open habit that offers both shelter and food for visiting birds. Ours has been positioned at the bottom of the garden and under-planted with shade-loving perennials. To give the tree planting a ceremonial edge we set it on top of the placenta (carefully carried home from hospital in a Tupperware container) and toasted the good health of baby Isla and tree with a glass of champagne. The tree clearly loves its nutritious cushion – it put on a visible growth spurt before it shed its leaves for winter. We're looking forward to great things next year.

A hard-working tree

The crab apple is one of those rare, catch-all trees that tick not one but all the boxes on the gardener's checklist. It all starts in spring with a riot of blousy white or pink blossom that draws in the pollinators as they stir from their winter slumber. The trees are invaluable as a pollinating partner for other apples, so plant one within your mini orchard and you're sure to boost the fruiting prospects of your other trees.

Once the flowers have been pollinated, crab apples come alive with their burgeoning fruits, borne in generous clusters – the very definition of cornucopian plenty! They are ready to pick from early autumn and, just as the spring blossom draws in the bees, any fruits left on the tree into winter serve as a beacon to birds, putting your garden firmly on the map. As an established tree produces so many crabs that there's rarely any compromise to be had between man and beast – there's more than enough for all. A final blaze of glory at leaf fall completes the joys of this eager-to-please beauty.

How To Grow

Happy in sun or light shade – and in just about any soil – the humble crab apple isn't hard to please. While you certainly don't need to add a placenta to your planting hole, improving poor soil by mixing in a bucket or two of garden compost or well-rotted manure will help to get your tree off to a solid start.

Dig out your planting hole so that the roots of your tree can spread out unhindered. Loosen the bottom and sides of the hole to encourage roots to break out and anchor into the surrounding soil. Fill back the soil, feeding it in around the roots as you go to avoid any air pockets, then water to settle the soil further.

Ongoing care is easy. Water in dry weather for the first few years, apply a mulch of organic matter in early spring to give a boost for the new growing season, and prune in late winter to remove any dead, diseased or dying branches and to maintain shape. And that's it.

Which Type?

There are many hundreds of different species and cultivars of crab apple, so just like their bigger fruited sister you'll have plenty to choose from. The most popular is *Malus hupehensis*, a scab-resistant tree that forms masses of white flowers opening from pink buds. The fruits are cherry-sized and red, coinciding with spectacular autumn/fall leaf colour.

For sheer gorgeous, golden crabs look no further than *Malus x zumi* ‘Golden Hornet', whose fruits often hang on right through the winter to provide an invaluable food source for hungry birds. The fruits almost glow in the low light of autumn/fall. One of the best crabs for culinary use is *Malus* ‘Pink Glow', a smaller, well-behaved tree that follows its white blooms with large, dark pink, almost plum-sized fruits that are ideal for cooking. Pick this tree if you don't have much space to spare but still want a reliable, usable crop.

How to Eat Them

What's to be done with a small, sour fruit is perhaps not immediately obvious. The answer lies in its exceptionally high pectin and acid content, which makes it the ideal bedfellow for setting fruit jams. Pair it with berries and you'll not only achieve a good set but a rich, rounded flavor. Traditional crab apple jelly can be pepped up by adding a few chillies to the mix – a perfect combination of sweet-tart and gentle heat that's tailor-made for serving with meats.

I'm a big fan of sloe gin and fruit wines. Just like the tart sloes of the blackthorn bush, crab apples can be civilized by adding sugar and steeping in gin or vodka for three months before straining and serving. The strained liquid will contain the soul of the crab apple – a golden hue and heavenly aroma that's just the job for a cold winter's evening. I'll raise a glass to that!

By Benedict Vanheems.